



Iowa Department of Human Services

Terry E. Branstad
Governor

Kim Reynolds
Lt. Governor

Charles M. Palmer
Director

Differential Response System Shows Positive Child Welfare Results New System Provides Two Pathways for Assessment Updated June 2014

(Des Moines, Iowa) –The Iowa Department of Human Services has issued a report which says the state’s new system for handling child abuse cases is helping more families get services aimed at keeping kids safe.

The department began using the bipartisan-approved Differential Response System on January 1, 2014. This system creates two pathways - child abuse assessment or family assessment - for handling child abuse and neglect allegations.

New data shows that about one-third of families are being assigned to the family assessment pathway, which focuses on connecting families with services and supports which can enhance safety and stability.

“This new approach, which strengthens families while protecting children, is performing as expected, and Iowa is seeing positive results which align with national trends,” said Wendy Rickman, administrator of Adult, Child and Family Services. “This was truly a bi-partisan effort, with lawmakers providing support and guidance in developing Iowa’s Differential Response System. Preliminary data is indicating the new model is successful.”

Traditional child abuse assessments include an investigation to determine if child abuse has occurred, followed by a decision regarding whether the name of the perpetrator must be placed on an abuse registry. The implementation of a Differential Response System continues the investigatory approach with the more serious cases, and uses a proactive approach for less serious cases.

“The emphasis on determining whether abuse occurred can overshadow helping a family meet their unique needs. And, it may set the stage for an adversarial relationship with child protection workers,” said Rickman. “Now there’s an opportunity to improve family functioning, dynamics and healthy child development before negative action, and this can help families become stronger and remain safer for kids.”

The family assessment pathway is not used in physical or sexual abuse cases, or other types of serious abuse cases seen here <http://dhs.iowa.gov/child-abuse>. It is used only in denial of critical care cases where the child is not in imminent danger. If at any time during a family assessment it appears the child isn’t safe, the case is reassigned to the child abuse assessment pathway. Iowa law clearly defines assignment and reassignment criteria for child abuse cases.

The initial data from January 2014 to March 2014 indicates the following:

- 35 percent, or 1,993 families from a total 5,787 accepted intakes, received a family assessment. The initial projected estimate under the new system was 37 percent.
- 231 cases, or 4 percent of family assessment cases, were reassigned from the family assessment pathway to the child abuse pathway, which aligns with the national standard of 2 percent to 5 percent.
- 1,994 families, about 400 more than the previous quarter, were referred for state-funded services.
- The percentage of founded cases increased 4 percent for more serious cases. The smaller total number of cases on the child abuse pathway combined with the fact they are more serious cases results in a higher founded percentage. Overall, fewer names were placed on the central abuse registry.

Differential Response Systems are used in about two dozen states, and supported by the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). Studies from other states have found that under such systems, subsequent reporting of families decreases and families' engagement increases, while safety remains the same.

Laverne Armstrong, DHS's administrator of field operations, said the department will continue monitoring outcomes under the new system.

"The goal of Iowa's child welfare system is to keep families together whenever that can be done safely, and this data shows the new approach is working to provide needed services and supports toward that goal," Armstrong said. "More families are now taking the opportunity to engage in activities designed to enhance the safety and stability of their families."

For more information
Amy Lorentzen McCoy
amccoy@dhs.state.ia.us
515-281-4848

and

<http://dhs.iowa.gov/child-welfare/differential-response>